Design changes afoot for state Web pages

Online renovation includes search-engine upgrade that features Scott Jones' ChaCha instead of Google

By **Scott Olson**
solson@ibj.com

A redesigned state Web portal unveiled last month should make it easier for Hoosiers to plow through mounds of government minutia.

But, more important, the revamping set to be finished in mid-2008 represents a major shift in state policy. By contracting with locally based ChaCha Search Inc.— tech entrepreneur Scott Jones' new human-assisted Internet search engine—the state no longer relies solely on big, name-brand computer technology such as Microsoft.

"We have somebody who is local and excited about taking the site to the next level," said Chris Cotterill, director of IN.gov, the moniker for the state's Web site. "We would not have gone with them if it wasn't great service. It's really icing on the cake that they're an Indiana company."

The agreement is the first major contract for ChaCha, which Jones launched in September, and replaces Google as the state's primary search engine. ChaCha receives no money from the state and instead generates revenue from users of the service.

"It's great validation for us, because we were able to prove that our technology was able to deliver," said Brad Bostic, president of ChaCha. "They've made it clear that they will not make a decision to go with someone from the state of Indiana just because they're here."

Established in 1995, the Web site www.IN.gov —formerly known as accessIndiana—is the primary nexus for public interaction with state government. On an average month, it sees 45 million "hits." Until January 2006, Indiana Interactive Inc., a subsidiary of Kansas-based National Information Consortium Inc., had managed facets of the site since its inception.

After spending months reviewing competitive bids from potential vendors, the state in June renewed its contract with Indi-

Indiana online

The state is revamping www.IN.gov and its accompanying agency pages.

Established: 1995

Average monthly hits: 45 million

State entities: more than 100

Total Web pages: 350,000

Annual amount of online transactions: $150 million

Important dates: Redesigned Web portal was launched April 18, with agency pages to be finished by July 2008

Source: State Office of Technology

ana Interactive, which bested four other companies. They were Indianapolis-based Quest Information Systems Inc., Carmel-based Xsimple, Colorado-based Ciber Inc. and Visionary Enterprises of Wabash.

Under the new, four-year agreement, Indiana Interactive ceded management of Web operations to the state's Office of Technology and agreed to less money. The state assumed leadership, starting in August 2005 with Cotterill's appointment as director of IN.gov. In addition, the state cut the amount Indiana Interactive receives from certain fees generated online from $7 million to $4.2 million.

Indiana Interactive still maintains the Web portal and is partnering with the state to streamline most state agency sites. The aim is to provide a look of uniformity.

"We started to pull back the priorities," Cotterill said of the state's relationship with Indiana Interactive. "We manage, and you do. That's not rocket science. That's the way it should have been."

Cotterill said company executives have reacted "very well" to the changes. Fred Sargeson, general manager of Indiana Interactive, concurred.

"It's still a tremendous opportunity for

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IN.GOV

us," he said. "It's just that the funding model has changed."

Indiana Interactive has 24 employees and expects to add a few more this summer. Its services are dedicated entirely to the state, for which it builds and maintains Web applications.

Over the last decade, Indiana Interactive has built a showcase state Web portal, earning dozens of awards. In 2005, for example, it placed third in California-based Center for Digital Government's "Best of the Web" competition. The previous year, it took second in the same event.

The redesign introduced April 18 features a portal meant to be more user-friendly, largely by presenting content in a clearer format, officials said. It sports central "billboard" graphics that have become trendy in modern Web site design.

Navigation, search, online services and other characteristics of the portal will appear in the same location on agency Web pages to provide consistency among all state sites.

"It's an expectation, really," said Amy Baker, director of interactive at locally based Fusion Alliance, the city's largest Web site developer. "As other sites move toward a better user experience, it raises the bar for all sites to perform at an optimum level."

The switch to ChaCha should improve search capabilities, which will expand from

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These days, Kraus said, telephony standards are emerging. As they mature, software will work on anybody's equipment. And the most attractive software will come from the company with the most—and best-unified—applications.

"I expect [Interactive Intelligence] to continue to focus on offering a well-integrated suite, a broad suite of applications," Kraus said. "I expect to see them continuing to increase the functionality of many of their existing applications... as well as some of the technologies that are good but not as fully featured."

Interactive Intelligence board member Mark Hill knows a thing or two about high-tech software firms himself. He sold his own, the banking software-maker Baker-Hill, to Experian for an undisclosed sum. These days, he's reinvesting some of his gains into new IT firms through his own local venture capital company, Collina Ventures.

Hill said Interactive Intelligence is so short of space inside its current headquarters that it has leased floors of buildings in the relatively near vicinity. He said the company is on a "growth tear," and that Interactive Intelligence's success points the way for other entrepreneurial high-tech firms.

It shows that perseverance pays off, he said. And that successful IT firms don't have to move to the coasts.

"It's interesting that we have this little gem of a company here in Indianapolis with some of the top engineering talent in the world," Hill said. "The best way to look forward is to look at their past. They're having success. That's exciting and indicative of exciting things to come."•

state agency sites to the entire Internet. ChaCha employs existing search engines, along with a human component that leads to better search results.

The company employs a network of people who can respond quickly to user inquiries. The idea is that they'll pinpoint more precise answers than the wildly variable responses offered by other search engines.

Another addition involves the "frequently asked questions" section. The top questions clicked upon by visitors to any state site are compiled on the IN.gov portal and are ranked by how many hits they receive.

On one particular day, for instance, the question, "How do I find out if I have unclaimed property?" topped the list. Click-

ing on the text provides the answer. The idea is to promote accessibility, Cotterill said.

"The Web site is the easiest place to do business with state government. Period," he said. "It's all about 24/7 service."

That credo has become evident by the ability of Hoosiers to sidestep the bureaucratic red tape often synonymous with government and conduct online transactions. They range from paying taxes to renewing vehicle registrations to purchasing hunting and fishing licenses.

There are more than 100 state entities and roughly 350,000 total Web pages. All told, 10,000 visitors transact more than $150 million each year through IN.gov.

Beginning May 1, agency sites will begin to transition to the new design. The Office of

Technology and the Governor's Office will be among the first to feature the new look, which should be standard by July 2008.

Of the executive branch agencies, the Indiana Economic Development Corp., Hoosier Lottery, State Fair, State Museum and Office of Tourism are exempt. Elected officials, the General Assembly and judiciary are invited to use the new design, if they choose.

Under the new protocol, approved state employees within the agencies now will make updates and changes to their sites instead of Indiana Interactive technicians, so information can be posted quicker, Cotterill said.

The design of the state's Web portal had been the same since 2003.•